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HOW DO TEACHERS UNDERSTAND DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION, EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES AND THEIR ROLES IN SCHOOL?

Abstract

To talk about democracy in school, several basic principles must be observed that secure democratic organization of schoolwork and equal access to education. The aim of this study, then, was to inquire into teachers' beliefs towards controversial behaviors that might be noticeable in schools (e.g. relations with students, extra-curricular tutoring, and teachers' attitudes towards his/her own work (intrinsic/extrinsic).

By focusing on questions such as: *Who do teachers perceive as responsible for their professional development; How do teachers perceive their work with "good" and "bad" students; and How do teachers perceive their ability to influence the workings of their school?* we are led to understand the manner in which teachers beliefs play out in school. These beliefs become important if school is to fulfill its role for democratic society.

Abstrakt

Aby wprowadzać demokrację w szkołach, należy przestrzegać kilka podstawowych zasad umożliwiających demokratyczną organizację pracy i równy dostęp do edukacji. Celem badań było sprawdzenie przekonań nauczycieli na temat kontrowersyjnych zachowań zauważalnych w szkołach (na przykład relacje nauczyciel – uczeń, korepetycje, postawy nauczycieli wobec własnej pracy).

Skupiając się na pytaniach: *kto według nauczycieli jest odpowiedzialny za ich rozwój zawodowy, co nauczyciele myślą o swojej pracy z uczniami uważanym za "dobrych" i "złych", jak nauczyciele oceniają swój wpływ na pracę szkoły?* próbuję zrozumieć sposób, w jaki nauczyciele wprowadzają swoje przekonania w pracy w szkole. Te przekonania stają się istotne w sytuacji, gdy szkoła ma odgrywać swą rolę w demokratycznym społeczeństwie.

1. Democratic Education as a Unicorn

It seems that lately we witness the failure of the institutions that were "invented" to support democracy. This criticism touches, with a special strength, schools as well. In Poland, a popular statement claims that school has demoralized children and teenagers, killed passion and creativity in young people, and is responsible for recreating the social injustice of the surroundings.[1] Similar trends in discussions about school are visible all over the world. Unfortunately, there is a serious threat that school is not able to fulfill the expectations of modern societies. In this paper I describe the attempt to ask teachers about "blurred" issues that might have critical influence on the process of teaching and learning. In a comparative study conducted in Poland, Romania and Midwest of USA we tried to take a closer look at teachers' beliefs connected with issues almost invisible in the educational discourse.

There is still possible to find a shared belief, rooted in functional approach, that education benefits the whole society and plays a critical role for a healthy democracy.[2] However, one of the basic conditions for a successful education is an established "common ground," agreement on basic aims, means and actions. Unfortunately, very often people tend to ignore the process of communication of those basic pillars, and instead of building on openly agreed upon priorities, subconsciously follow their own directions, unclear rules, that are rooted in tradition and rituals,[3] instead of the newest research results. It is difficult to believe that schools will support democracy while we witness the lack of basic rules of democracy in schools. How could we help teachers to nurture the democratic climate in school? I believe that we need to invite them to real, authentic discussion about real, important issues. Civil society itself needs open discourse about all critical issues that are shaping reality, therefore ignoring inequality or other controversial issues brings a threat to the young democracy. It is impossible to build a healthy political system in which some groups are educated in a way that stops them from speaking for themselves.[4]

Permanent development, the process of globalization and the appearance of the new phenomenon of human civilization – the "knowledge society," creates numerous, ambitious but difficult tasks.[5] One needs to remember that to prepare our apprentices to live in a democratic world, schools must also reflect a demo-

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[1] A. Kaczara, *O kryzysie szkoły raz jeszcze*, in: *Z aktualnych problemów oświaty i kultury*, J. Kargul (ed.), Prace Pedagogiczne, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 1997, p. 35–48.

[2] S. Bartlett, D. Burton & N. Peim, *Introduction to Education Studies*, Paul Chapman Publishing, London 2001.

[3] R. Meighan & I. Siraj-Blatchford, *A Sociology of Educating*, 4th edition, Continuum, London, New York 2003.

[4] P. Bourdieu, *Męska dominacja*, Oficyna Naukowa, Warszawa 2004.

[5] A. Hargreaves, *Teaching in the Knowledge Society. Education in the Age of Insecurity*, Teachers College Press, Philadelphia 2003; G. Marx, *Future-Focused Leadership. Preparing Schools, Students, and Communities for Tomorrow Realities*, ASCD, Alexandria, VA 2006.

cratic model, both in relation to organization and to values. To talk about democracy in school, several basic principles must be observed that are critical: the democratic organization of schoolwork and equal access to education.[6] This is the only possible way to teach young people how to participate in social life. To be able to construct conditions and to conduct the process, teachers need to understand the evolution of school and school procedures as a part of historical dynamics, where different forms of knowledge, social structure and beliefs are perceived as clear-cut outcomes of specific class or group demands.[7] It is difficult and rare but essential for teachers to place their beliefs and values in a wide-ranging context. A teacher is a value, aim and tool of educational policy. His/her task is not only to pass knowledge and values, but also to organize and inspire young people. Teachers' activities are aimed towards the future of societies.[8]

Unfortunately, most teachers are focused on the present and everyday situation at school, concentrating on meeting high demands and surviving in a jungle of regulations and expectations from educational authorities, students and their parents. This results in a lack of a broader perspective in their view of school and often causes situations that are difficult for both groups, students and teachers.

Different mechanisms and phenomena create invisible obstacles for democratic and authentic education. Quite often we witness undemocratic conditions in a democratic context only because something has "always" existed. Teachers might surrender their responsibility due to the conviction that they do not have to do anything because "it was always like this." Those situations first create threats to equal access to education and, eventually, to democracy. Democracy demands an active approach to reality. Teachers' behavior and their ethical or non-ethical attitudes in school and in the classroom are considered to be a key factor in shaping democratic values and the democratic climate in educational institutions. Investigating teachers' beliefs and attitudes towards different issues of schooling and democratic environments, especially in a comparative perspective, can bring some interesting ideas to the forefront for discussion.

2. Methodology

How do teachers in three unique contexts respond to questions central to the concepts of democratic education, equal access and teacher efficacy? We entered the study with the assumption that controversial issues and teachers' approaches to those issues, show hidden, covered, beliefs that influence the process of education.

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[6] P. Freire, *Pedagogy of Freedom. Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., Boulder, New York, Oxford 2001; I. Shor, *Empowering Education. Critical Teaching for Social Change*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 1992.

[7] H.A. Giroux, *Teoria krytyczna i racjonalność w edukacji obywatelskiej*, in: *Wprowadzenie do pedagogiki*, T. Jaworska, R. Leppert (eds.), Oficyna Wydawnicza IMPULS, Kraków 1998.

[8] Cz. Banach, *Etos i kultura pedagogiczna nauczyciela i szkoły*, in: *Etos edukacji w XXI wieku*, I. Wojnar (ed.), Komitet Prognoz "Polska 2000 plus" przy Prezydium PAN, Warszawa 2000.

We strongly claim that those beliefs and assumptions that do not support and confirm democratic values in school, influence, in a negative way, everyday school practices by creating groups of students with different access to education.

The study described here focused on gathering survey data from teachers in Poland, Romania and the Midwest of the United States.[9] The survey was developed collaboratively based on an original study conducted in Poland.[10] Surveys were administered anonymously during the 2005–2006 school year in each country. We decided to focus on schools and teachers involved in any school reform effort assuming that in this way result would show opinions of important "players" of educational reality. Surveys were given to both teachers participating in specific professional development activities and also sent to the staff of schools involved in such efforts. Only volunteers answered to survey. The size of the samples is significantly different (Poland and Romania larger, United States smaller).

Comparative studies are threatened and supported, both at the same time, by the forces of the individual contexts in which they occur. Looking at important questions requires some understanding of the contexts in which individual respondents are positioned. In Poland this study targeted schools participating in The Learning School Program (LSP) run by the Center for Citizenship Education in Warsaw. The whole program is driven by certain important beliefs which imply that the group of Polish teachers comes from specific schools that are active and work in the way that should support cooperation, reflection and open discourse. The research project in Romania targeted a range of different compulsory schools. The criteria to select both schools and teachers were designed based on their activeness and participation in educational reform projects over the last five years. In the United States this research project targeted schools located in a region, often called the Midwest. All teachers are located in middle (grades 6–8) or high schools (grades 9–12).

3. Findings: Burdens and Doubts

For this paper a few selected aspects of the collected data were chosen to focus on:

- Teachers' views on responsibility in the process of their professional development;

[9] This comparative study was conducted by Lucian Ciolan from University of Bucharest in Romania, John M. Fischer from Bowling Green State University in USA and Grzegorz Mazurkiewicz from Jagiellonian University in Poland. Results of the study were partially presented under the title: *Shades of Grey: Teachers Beliefs and the Shaping of Democratic Education* during European Educational Research Association annual conference in 2007 and in the paper *Facing Two Directions at Once: Romanian, Polish and Midwestern U.S. Teachers. Beliefs about Efficacy and Their Work* (under review).

[10] G. Mazurkiewicz, *Odcienie szarości. Nauczyciele – doświadczenia i postawy wobec zawodu. Raport z badań*, Zabrze 2003.

- Teachers' beliefs describing relationships and effort in their work with students defined as gifted and/or considered challenged (struggling);
- Teachers' opinions about their level of influence on the school's reality and student educational processes and lives.

Selecting those particular issues we wanted to stress that some of the important issues that determine school practice are hidden behind silence or lack of awareness. Autonomy and responsibility are key elements of the teachers' involvement in quality assurance system and the individual development is a reflection of it. Teaching all students is one of the most important features of the democratic school what is significantly influenced by beliefs about gifted and challenged students. Understanding of the individuals' impact on schools and students is a condition for teachers' willingness to be a part of the support system for their students.

3.1. Responsibility and Rewards

One of the problems that societies struggle with, especially in former communist countries, is inherited passiveness – the expectation that somebody will take care about "things," that someone will prepare conditions, that there exists institutions that will be responsible for something that might be easily (or sometimes not easily) solved by us. School, defined by the mission and the purpose of education, should play an important role in preparing citizens for active life. This task is significantly jeopardized when teachers are agents that support passiveness instead of promoting an active approach to education, careers and reality.

One of the important issues for teacher professionalism is constant development, training and continuous education. So, the approach to this process should be an indicator of the level of passiveness in creating the work environment and determining the individual's position in the school structure. We asked teachers in United States, Romania and Poland about their opinion on who is responsible for teachers' professional development? We assumed that teachers who believe that it is their own responsibility would be more effective in supporting students in the struggle with their conditions because they are able to authentically motivate students. When teachers see the benefits coming from individual and professional development they understand that their work in school in not only transferring information but that they are responsible for explaining the context and the process of learning and developing. When teacher is able to show deep involvement in the process (even through his or her example) the relationship between teacher and students helps to accelerate learning.

40% in Poland and 47% of teachers in Romania and the USA claimed that it (professional development) should be included in the area of their responsibility. This means that more than half of the questioned teachers do not feel responsible, in the first place, for their own professional development. They were looking for others who should be responsible for their development. Quite big group believed that principals should be responsible (Poland 38%, USA 32% and Romania 12%). A minority, but significant number, took the position that the responsibility for

this process is outside of the school building – they claim that those who should take this responsibility are local governments, ministries, and boards of education (21% in USA, 22% in Poland and 39% in Romania).

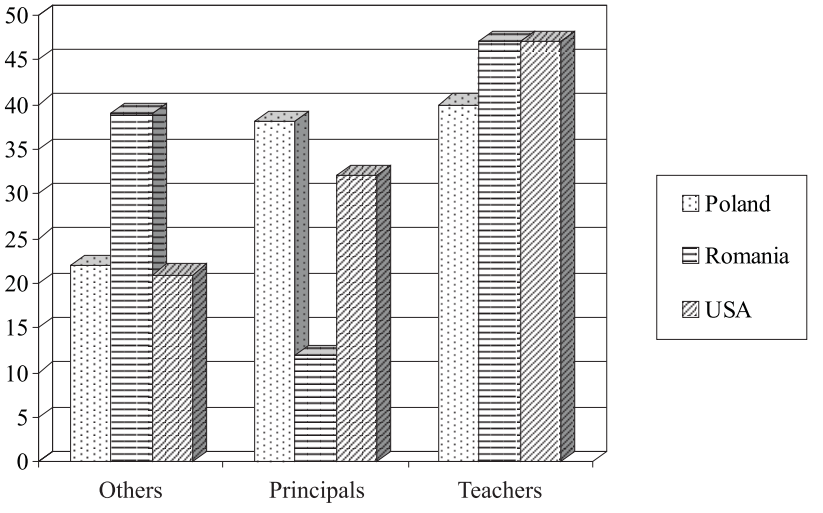

Fig. 1. Responsibility pyramid: who is responsible for teachers' professional development?

The data presented does not allow us to create clear-cut conclusions about teacher approaches to their professional development and it is also difficult to claim that it is possible to find a shared view on the responsibility for it. One who tries to interpret the result of this question can not be sure about any value judgment of this picture – is it enough that almost half the teachers believe that they are the ones who should plan and conduct the development process?

It is interesting to compare those results to answers to the next question that clearly show that teachers do not accept those who are not involved in professional development. When we asked: is it OK to not participate in any form of PD for three years? A majority of teachers answered in one way – it is not acceptable (81.6% in USA, 74.5% in Romania and 71.9% in Poland). This is an impressive result although it may create confusion when compared with the information that the majority of teachers do not feel responsible for that process in general.

The complicated issue of teachers' efficacy, their feeling of empowerment and possibility to change students lives, is influenced by teachers' vision of themselves as professionals. We believe that this vision, including those presented above: responsibility for professional development and the obligation to participate in training, includes acceptance of some kinds of accountability procedures.

One of the popular convictions is that better teachers should be rewarded higher than bad teachers. So we asked: is it acceptable to correlate teacher's income with their professional performances? We never explained what we under-

stand by "professional performance," so it is possible that teachers understand it differently, but it is interesting that Romanian teachers in general accept this rule, while American and Polish teachers are almost equally divided in judgment about this issue.

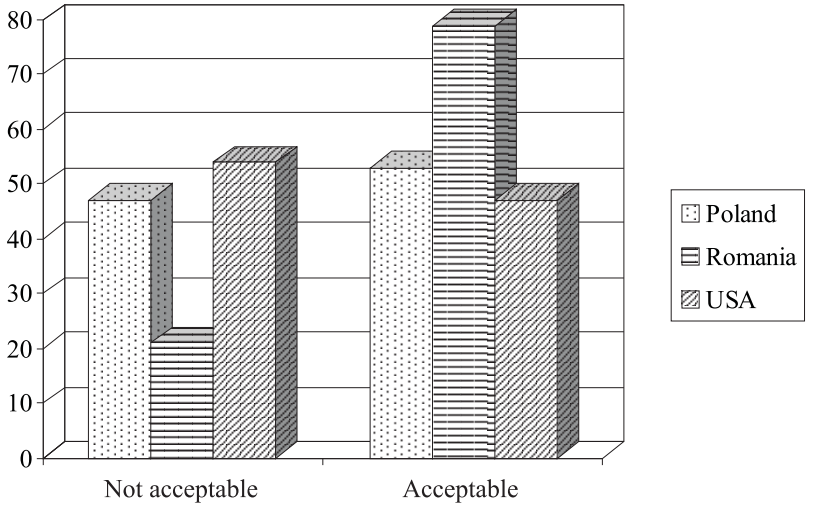

Fig. 2. Question: is it acceptable to correlate teacher's income with their professional performances?

Only one fifth of the teachers surveyed in Romania protested against the idea of connecting their salary with the results of their work. Probably, they believe that it is possible to influence students and their performance by "appropriate" teaching, while American and Polish teachers are concerned about it. This was the only point in which teachers from different countries expressed their opinion in radically different ways. The two first issues (responsibility and participation) where rather similar.

3.2. Labels: Regular and Gifted Student[11]

Next we would like to present data that shows how teachers' approaches to students are shaped by their judgments of students' abilities. This group of questions connect the amount of teachers' work with students to their (teachers') views of the student (gifted or not).

First, we were interested if teachers believe that they should speak bluntly to students about their perceived talents. The analyses started with a question about teachers' opinions on their right to "inform" students about their ability to learn.

[11] This section (3.2) is based on L. Ciolan, J.M. Fischer & G. Mazurkiewicz, *Facing Two Directions at Once: Romanian, Polish and Midwestern U.S. Teachers. Beliefs about Efficacy and Their Work* (under review).

We asked: Do you believe it is appropriate for teachers to bluntly tell students of low ability that they will not succeed in your school? A significant difference emerged across the three national groups on this item. Polish and American teachers were overwhelmingly opposed to the notion of a teacher telling students of low ability that they will not succeed in their school. Over 75% of teachers in both those countries agreed with the statement "Completely unacceptable and should not be allowed." Teachers in these schools have probably worked within reform efforts that have, as one of their key goals, raising the expectations of students. Low ability is not viewed as an essential, unchangeable state, rather, through hard work all students can succeed. However, Romanian teachers did not see it this way. Over 60% of the Romanian teachers found it acceptable under certain circumstances or completely acceptable.

One American teacher seemed to summarize the feelings of many when they said, *(it is) difficult to motivate when you're tearing them down all the time. Who knows what true ability combined with motivation and effort can accomplish.* Like Americans the majority of Polish teachers added an opinion to this question and in their comments tried to explain their short answers. So, those who can not accept it, were pointing at rules and values that they believe in: *we should appreciate every effort and praise every success, you can not "cross out" a human being, we need to motivate and inspire, it is immoral, everyone has a chance for success, this would kill their desire (toward) learning and self-esteem*. It is obvious that the teachers surveyed believe in their students or at least they believe in the statement that everyone has his or her own talent and chance for success in a certain area. Those who were agreeing with the necessity of informing students about their low abilities or the negative opinion about their chances in school, were talking about this as a motivational tool: *sometimes it is good to tell something openly and without any doubts to shake them and motivate (them) to work*. The Romanian teachers' main argument was: *students need to know their real competence, to be aware of the importance of learning and not make illusions that they know too much or that they don't know anything.* Realism, fairness, and motivating the students, supporting a realistic self-assessment, were the main arguments brought by Romanian teachers in supporting this position.

Secondly, we asked about work with less capable students: Do you believe it is appropriate for teachers to put less effort in to work with classes considered less capable than others? Overwhelming majorities in the United States and Poland found it completely unacceptable or unacceptable in their opinion to put less effort into classes of less capable students. In Romania, the vast majority also found it unacceptable, but 56% said "only in their opinion." Another 36% indicated it is completely unacceptable.

Many American teachers added in their written comments a general belief that in fact the teacher needs to work harder, not give less effort. In a quote that summarizes much of the group's opinion, one American teacher wrote, *actually they need to work harder for these classes, no student should be written off.* This opinion was also present in Polish teachers' responses and reactions. *We need to put more effort and work harder with students who are less capable* was repeated

like a mantra in a majority of surveys. Some of them were pointing to teachers' roles: *teachers are obligated to search for new ideas, approaches, techniques and methods*, others were underlying that *teachers need to adjust the style of work not just decrease amount of work with less capable students*. A few bitter (or realistic) remarks were found: *it is extremely difficult and very often does not bring results* and in the same moment somebody mentioned: I *know from experience that work with a group of this kind of students might bring very positive and sometimes unexpected results*. In general, while discussing the issue of work with less capable students, teachers were talking mainly about the art of teaching. Romanians also considered that a significantly harder effort should be mobilized in working with less capable students, in order to bring them to acceptable standards of achievement and to eventually bridge the existing gaps. One teacher said that *here you can see the real competence of a teacher, in making less competitive students achieve... It is easy to work with the motivated ones and then claim that you are successful...*

Third, we asked teachers what do they think about focusing on the most capable students. We asked: do you believe it is appropriate for teachers to concentrate on the gifted or best students in a classroom? Results show a significant difference in the approach to students when you compare it to the previous question – when asked whether it is appropriate for teachers to "concentrate" on "gifted" students in the classroom a perceptible shift occurred in the responses in comparison to the question about their work with those students not considered gifted. Suddenly, Polish teachers were able to find it acceptable under certain conditions (50%) and completely acceptable (43%) which makes approximately 93% of the Polish teachers accepting a concentration of effort on gifted students. Romanian teachers were evenly divided on this (50% indicating unacceptable and 50% choosing some form of acceptable). The teachers in the United States reacted differently, but still found it less unacceptable than the previous item with over 70% choosing some form of unacceptable.

When given a chance to add comments, teachers in the United States often added comments that indicated they expected teachers to work with all students and that any effort with gifted students should not be at the expense of the other students in the class. However, there were concerns raised about the special attention that gifted students need and deserve. *They are sometimes as much at risk as the low performing students* expressed the concern of one teacher. Others argued *gifted students need to be allowed to tackle more difficult projects if they are able.*

Polish teachers through their answers and responses to the two questions about the level of teachers' involvement in teaching less capable and gifted students create a strange mental image of the Polish school and teacher's obligations. In a big simplification: it is unacceptable to put less effort into work with less capable students (and even more important, we find this out in the reactions stating that they need to work more with them) while in the same moment it is rather acceptable to work more with gifted students if it does not hurt others. A typical comment pointed attention to fairness: *if it does not influence others it is OK, if it happens during extra activities after regular classes we may accept it*.

The Romanian teachers' comments to this question were split in two directions. Those considering this approach as being acceptable or acceptable in certain conditions, supported their position by mentioning that instruction should be differentiated and the gifted for sure need special attention from this perspective. In the same time, another significant number situated themselves on a different perspective, claiming that it is not acceptable to concentrate on the gifted because of the principle of *equal treatment for all.*

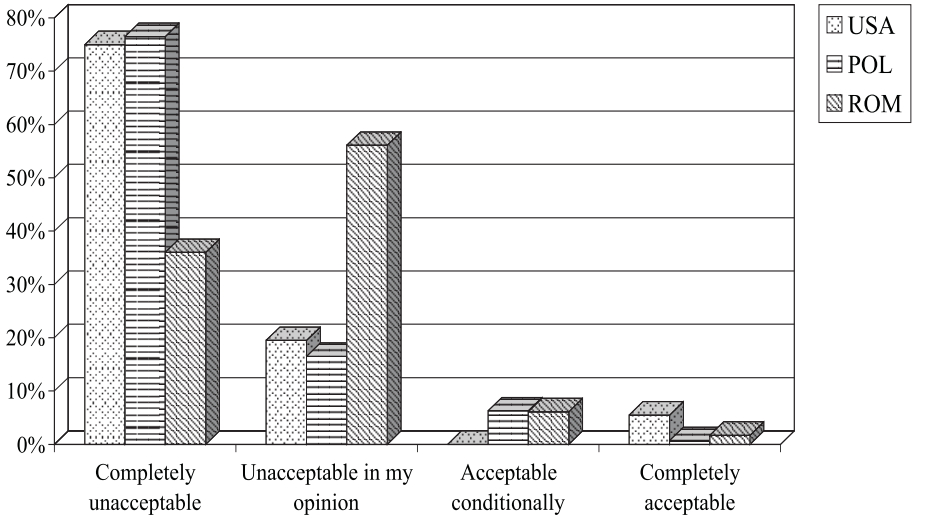

Fig. 3. Question: Do you believe it is appropriate for teachers to put less effort in to work with classes considered less capable than others?

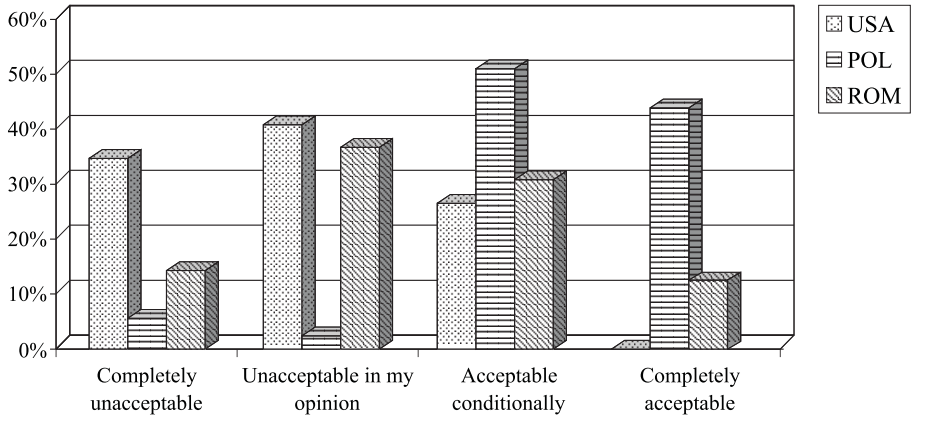

Fig. 4. Question: Do you believe it is appropriate for teachers to concentrate on the gifted or best students in a classroom?

The Romanian teachers' comments to this question were split in two directions. Those considering this approach as being acceptable or acceptable in certain conditions, supported their position by mentioning that instruction should be differentiated and the gifted for sure need special attention from this perspective. In the same time, another significant number situated themselves on a different perspective, claiming that it is not acceptable to concentrate on the gifted because of the principle of *equal treatment for all.*

3.3. Perception of the Influence

One of the very interesting and still not clear issues impacting the effectiveness of the process of teaching and learning is the teacher's attitudes towards their role, tasks and goals. It is agreed that the perception of teachers about their own influence in schools has a lot to do with the school culture and the openness to participation and democratic governance of the institution. In this set of questions we try to inquire how teachers feel about their influence on school work as an organization, to what extent they can influence students' self-esteem and how much they can motivate students' with low levels of motivation.

When asked *How much can you influence the decisions that are made in your school?*, the respondents who feel the greatest influence are, as a mean, the Americans, followed by Poles and Romanians. Almost 40% of the American teachers believe they have significant influence on decision making, which may suggest a school culture characterized in a significant way by openness and a democratic climate, valuing the contribution of every staff member. A similar group among American teachers says they have "some" influence. The majority of Romanian (53%) and Polish (56%) teachers situated themselves in the middle: they can influence some areas, but some other areas not. This could mean that teachers power in schools is important, but they still identify some areas as closed from their influence (23% of Poles and 20% of Romanians believe they have significant influence).

If we look to the other extreme of the scale (almost no influence or no influence at all) we find here more than 20% of the Romanian and Polish teachers. It is a large number of "pessimists" seeing no influence on decisions taken at the school level. This category of teachers is a source of resistance to change and reforms. We can imagine they have low motivation and probably they don't see the point of getting involved since they cannot "shape" the school reality themselves (this study was conducted in schools involved in different types of reform initiatives, so we may predict that in "regular" schools the percentage of teachers who do not believe in their power would be bigger). A majority of teachers in all the countries takes the safe position "in the middle": yes, we can influence some decisions and cannot others. The biggest number of those holding the conviction that they might have an impact in a serious way can be found in American schools and the biggest number of those who doubt in any kind of influence work in Polish and Romanian schools.

4. Is it My Work? Summary and Discussion

We do not know what would be a satisfying percentage of teachers believing that it is their responsibility to take care about their own growth and development. We do not know the answer to the question how long someone can ignore training and other courses. We struggle with the image of the teacher who shows "the product" everyday and is rewarded by the weight of this product. We see that a problem is situated in the lack of teachers' discourse. It looks like they are threatened by difficult questions. But we ask: how do teachers handle the dichotomy they have created in their beliefs? For example, how can they argue not to provide less effort with low performing students, those less capable, while at the same time argue that gifted students should receive special attention. In a classroom with a range of students, how would you accomplish one without having the effect of the other? Some teachers appear to operate in an educational system that reflects acceptance of the notion of a meritocracy. These teachers largely agreed to tell students bluntly that the student will not succeed. Some teachers appear to operate in a schizophrenic manner. They want to both, not lessen the attention on lower students, while paying lots of special attention in the class on those that are gifted. How might this be possible? Can you do both? And if they do not believe it is appropriate to tell students of less ability that they will not succeed, how will they explain to those same students and their families the completely acceptable (their view) attention being paid to the gifted students in the class.

Unfortunately, teachers lack a significant perception of decision-making power and autonomy. It is disturbing that, in well established democracies, half of the teachers saw their possibilities to influence the system only "partially." Remembering the postulate that schools should be "clinics" of democracy, a place were students learn and train for participation in public life and democratic processes, it might be worrisome that adult professionals working in those institutions do not see themselves (in general) as citizens, but as *only an employee*. This might be a sad and dangerous indicator of teachers' passiveness and schools' helplessness. Democratic societies need strong and successful schools. Strong and successful schools need teachers with a sense of efficacy. Teachers do not posses the autonomy that is a driving force for development, cooperation and democracy – this influences democratic education in a negative way.

The discussion about differences between teachers' declarations and their actual practice in schools raises important questions. Are the ethics being damaged and, as a consequence, the democratic environment in our schools and societies? To what extent can we call teachers' behavior unethical? The fact is that they do not necessarily consider some of those behaviors as unethical, but completely acceptable or legitimate. Moreover a large proportion of teachers, even though they know and they are aware of the unethical aspects of the educational process, do not do much to solve the problem; they eventually appear to take a verbal position but rarely and much less often take action. This leads us to the situation in which the power and the willingness of teachers to shape democratic values and

to contribute to an ethically-driven education through putting in question their daily practice.

And probably this is one of the most useful conclusions from this study: teachers need professional in-service training if we want to support their professional development. It is not enough to have expert knowledge in a particular teacher's area of expertise in order to be a good teacher. It is not even enough to be an expert in teaching to be a teacher in a school preparing young people for democracy. Democracy is seen as an ambitious project and a challenging concept for the future of human kind. It is quite obvious that teachers, who are equipped "only" with tools that help them during the traditionally understood process of teaching and learning, will not pass the exam, which is to teach all students, inspire young people regardless of their abilities and show new directions for their students' lives. To do this, teachers need to start the discussions that we just pointed at. To be able to face those difficult questions they need to redefine their roles, and societies need to change their expectations. They will not be able to do it alone, we need to join the new discussion about the new school. This is the most urgent need – create new project – discussion around the whole globe about democratic education, as well as democratic schools that hire democratic teachers.

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